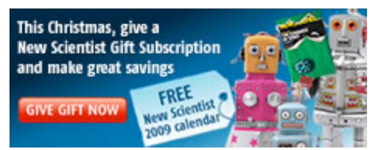

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Rules of the gender game: Even four-year-olds know what is 'appropriate' to their gender. Boys are keen to assert their masculinity, girls who try to play with the Lego find that the boys have already commandeered it

02 December 1989 by **BARBARA LLOYD**
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SEX AND gender are terms often used interchangeably. But sex more properly refers to biological differences of male and female; gender refers to society's construction of a system which identifies what is masculine and feminine. Individuals incorporate this system to develop their gender identities. Despite considerable research on gender issues in secondary and junior schools, few people have studied how gender develops in infant school, which children in Britain start when they are four to five years old. This may reflect a belief in the sexual innocence of children, but there are also ideological and conceptual reasons for this lack. Adults, parents and teachers often view sex and gender as natural and unproblematic; 'boys will be boys' and 'girls will be girls' are typical expressions.

More than 80 years ago, Sigmund Freud rejected the tradition that held sexuality to be biologically determined. He challenged the view that the sexual identity of a child inevitably 'unfolds' in one direction or another. Freud proposed instead that children construct a psychosexual identity from a bisexual potential through their experiences in the family. Despite enduring controversy about the nature of psychosexual development, psychologists accepted Freud's views on the importance of experience in childhood. They also accepted his chronology, which postulated that the oedipal complex was resolved between five and six years of age. Thus social learning theorists used to believe that gender differences in the behaviour of children under four years old were unstable, and cognitive developmentalists argued that a stable sense of gender identity emerged only at about five years.

The past 20 years have seen a dramatic change in the professional view of the development of gender identity; researchers now examine the behaviour of toddlers for signs of gender differences. As soon as children utter their first words, investigators listen for evidence of gender marking. Even the play of children in their second year has been scrutinised for evidence that toy preferences, patterns of activity, and sensual pleasure-seeking are marked by gender.

One of our observations, collected as part of a study of the construction of gender identities during children's first year at school, illustrates the sophisticated understanding of four-year-old children. Notable too is the attention teachers give to children's developing sense of gender identity.

Jonathan selects a pink-orange nylon nightie from the dressing-up rack and succeeds, after considerable difficulty, in getting it on. He then struggles to

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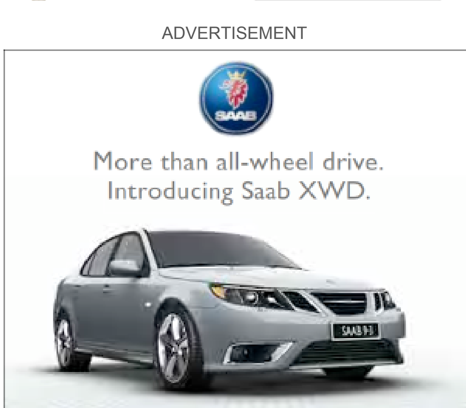

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put a small white satin tutu on top of it. Neither the other children nor the teacher pay attention. Eventually a girl in the class comes up and says: 'It's not for you, Jonathan.' Jonathan looks bemused but carries on trying to squeeze himself into the tutu. After concerted effort and failure he takes the tutu to the teacher and asks her to help him. She exclaims: 'Jonathan, that is the smallest dress we have, you won't fit into it. Let's go and look for something else.' Jonathan chooses a skirt and the teacher helps him put it on. While saying 'that's nice' she also encourages him to put on a waistcoat from a man's three-piece suit.

Each of the actors in this drama has a set of rules about the construction of a gender identity. The girl sees Jonathan's behaviour as a violation of a principle of gender identity which defines some garments as appropriate to females but inappropriate for males. The teacher is more flexible, allowing Jonathan to wear female clothes but urging him to don a garment appropriate to his gender as well. But this brief episode is silent on Jonathan's beliefs about his gender identity. He may be unaware of the gender marking of the nightie and tutu, but this is unlikely given his bemused air when tackled by a classmate. He may knowingly be violating a rule against cross dressing.

Through the analysis of such episodes, and my earlier research on gender knowledge in children as young as 18 months, I am trying to understand the earliest attempts of young children to construct gender identities.

Among psychologists some theorists, including Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Jacklin, explicitly use the terms sex and gender interchangeably. In my work, both with John Archer and with Gerard Duveen, I have been careful to separate them. Such precise specification avoids 'naturalising' gender differences: avoids, that is, assuming that patterns of action, feeling and behaviour that are confined to one gender are biologically determined.

At birth, doctors and parents use biological characteristics to determine an infant's sex. This categorisation into male and female is binary and ultimately derives from roles in sexual reproduction. The same characteristics are critical in assigning an infant membership in one of the two social categories we call gender. So important is the assignment of gender that in the rare cases where a baby's external genitalia are ambiguous, clinicians may analyse the infant's chromosomes to determine the genetic sex of the new recruit to society. Once membership in a sex category is determined, infants automatically become members of the congruent gender group and their lives are ordered by the set of rules which describe femininity and masculinity. These prescribe many aspects of the infant's life - name, dress, mode of handling and social expectations about action, feeling and behaviour.

In our analysis of the early development of gender, Gerard Duveen and I have suggested that the dimorphic biological characteristics related to sex function as signs for the construction of a social gender identity. We have invoked Serge Moscovici's theory of social representations to describe the unique rules or code a society constructs to regulate and communicate knowledge about gender and the relations between members of gender groups. Infants gain access to social representations of gender through their interaction with informed members of society. Their relations with parents, siblings and other adults and children are ordered by these representations. As children internalise social representations of gender, they can use them to assert and express social gender identities.

Unlike the binary characteristics of biological sex, the traits that define gender are often not binary; their distributions overlap between the sexes, and are much more complex. While a model deriving from sexual reproduction shapes the categories of female and male, heterosexuality does not constrain our use of the words masculinity and femininity. The choice of a sexual partner varies within the gender categories of woman and man. Although social life is not obviously suffused with gender regulation, the importance of gender in the construction of social life should not be underestimated nor its meaning in

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modern societies ignored.

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the social order imposed by social representations of gender is the hierarchical nature of the relations between gender groups. In education, politics or economics, group relations are structured by the power and prestige that marks masculinity. In my account of gender-marked play and of social interaction in school, it will become clear that this hierarchical structure influences children's interaction from an early age.

The dressing-up episode illustrated that by the time children enter school, they have internalised social representations of gender which enable them both to comprehend and produce signs of gender in their interaction with other children and adults. In exploring the roots of this internalisation, my colleagues and I have observed and interviewed children from 18 months to 4 years of age.

In two studies, we analysed videotape recordings of pairs of children at play in a room supplied with toys which parents had identified as feminine and masculine, that is, appropriate for girls and boys of this age. We found that pairs of boys spend more time playing with masculine toys than feminine toys but that pairs of girls displayed no consistent gender-marked preference, although they spent significantly less time playing with masculine toys than the boys. These differences became clearer after 2.5 years.

We concluded that even at this early age, girls and boys use toys differently. Boys avoid feminine toys and employ masculine toys to mark their membership on a gender category, while girls do not use toys to mark their gender identities. A further analysis of the congruence/incongruence between a child's gender category and choice of toys provided additional support for this view. Both girls and boys made more choices incongruent with their gender when playing in girl/boy pairs than in single gender pairs. But it was only boys who consistently chose more congruent than incongruent toys, whether with other boys or in mixed settings. Boys consistentlyasserted a masculine gender identity. But neithersetting prompted girls to engage primarily in femininemarked activity.

We also interviewed the children we had observed, to assess their capacities to comprehend and communicate knowledge of gender in different ways. We asked them to identify pictures of women and men, girls and boys with gender-marked words which we supplied. We also asked them to provide the appropriate words to describe the photographs. We asked them to sort the pictures of adults and children according to gender and to sort photographs of the playroom toys into gender-appropriate categories.

As expected, performance improved with age; children found it easier to identify the pictures than to produce the correct words; and photographs of people were easier to sort than those of toys. The under 2s could successfully identify people's gender 60 per cent of the time, but even children in their fourth year found it difficult to sort toys by gender. By and large, the performance of girls and boys was very similar and allowed us to conclude that both begin to internalise the social representation of gender at a very early age.

The similarity in girls' and boys' knowledge of the symbols of the gender system is in sharp contrast to their active expression of gender identities. The intellectual similarity makes it unlikely that girls lack the resources to assert their own social gender identity. One way to describe the styles of play of girls and boys is to say that boys assert an exclusive masculine identity while girls reject a narrow and exclusive definition of their femininity. As a result, gender does not appear to define how girls play. We know that girls have internalised the gender-marking of toys because they are as successful as boys at the toy sorting task. So can their undifferentiated choice of toy in play be linked to a resistance to femininity as it is defined in current social representations of

gender? Boys may be keen to claim their masculinity, while girls may be unwilling to be restricted by their femininity. Prestige and power accrues to masculinity. Perhaps even these very young children have internalised the values that are part of our gender system.

There is little doubt that children starting school have already developed feminine and masculine gender identities. Gerard Duveen and I have recently investigated the impact of school on these identities. Systematic observations and interviews were only undertaken after we had spent a year becoming familiar with reception classes in two schools. One school, sited in a predominantly middle-class area, had three classes for the new intake, structured by age. We worked with the youngest children, those who, in line with county regulations, had recently become four years old. In the first two terms they attended school only half the day. The other school, in an older working-class part of town, had a single reception class with children ranging in age from four to five years. These children attended school full-time only in the term in which they became five.

From systematic observations of individual children, we collected information on their companions, activities,material objects and degree to which the teacher regulatedthem. Boys spent more time in all-boy company and when inmixed company, in groups which were made up primarilyof boys. These groups were larger than those in which weobserved girls. Although girls spent much time in all-girlgroups, they appeared more often than boys in mixed groups, either in groups predominantly composed of other girls or in evenly mixed groups. By their third term, girls were participating in larger groups, much as the boys did.

To assess the influence of the teacher on the children's play we compared the composition of children's groups when their activity was organised by the teacher and by themselves. Across the school year, the influence of the teachers reduced the participation of both girls and boys in single-gender groups. But boys, even in the summer term, asserted a masculine identity through their participation in single gender and groups where boys formed the majority. Although boys took part more in mixed groups when the teacher organised the activity, girls still spent more time in predominantly boy groups than boys in groups where girls predominated.

Analyses also showed that girls and boys use space and materials differently. Boys, whether in all-boy groups, in predominantly boy groups, or on their own, use the open spaces in the classroom more often than do groups of girls. Girls spread their use of space more evenly throughout the classroom. Boys' use of space is more focused than that of girls; we found no spatial zone in the classroom used more frequently by all-girl groups.

A similar pattern emerges from the analyses of activity with objects. We grouped objects in terms of their potential for creative play, role play, directed play and construction play. Construction play involved the use of large bricks, toy cars, Lego, train sets and the like, and it was the primary focus of boys' activity - although this was less so when the activity was organised by the teacher. Girls divided their time more evenly among the various options, so they spent more time than boys in creative play with materials such water, sand, and play dough, role play with food, pram, telephone, cooker and clothes, and also in directed play using paint, number work, writing, reading schemes and the like.

Toys for the boys

When we discussed our findings with teachers, they commented that girls were not always able to gain access to the bricks, cars and train sets available in the classroom. Talk about intervening to ensure that girls had access to construction play led teachers to wonder whether it violated their commitment to antisexism. It was not clear whether commitment to an antisexist ideal or unease at challenging masculine power led to their

hesitation.

To assess what children know about gender in their use of language, toys and behaviour, we interviewed them in the autumn and again in the summer term. Utterances that adults attribute stereotypically to men and women, such as 'Damn it, it's broken' or 'Oh, what a lovely picture' were presented embedded in a story format. Although adults would attribute 4 of the 16 items to men and the rest to women, the children were eager to claim the utterances for their own gender group. Girls attributed more of the utterances to the girl in the story while boys assigned more to the boy. The strategies of girls and boys were similar in this formal respect, and there was no straightforward gender difference in performance. Girls and boys assigned few items consistently according to adult gender stereotypes. Only the two instances of 'blast it' were attributed correctly to the boy in both terms; the two uses of 'sweet' were assigned to the girl in the autumn and one instance of 'Look at me' to the boy in the summer.

The children adopted a similar strategy of assigning things to their own gender group when we asked them to choose photographs of items from their own classroom for a girl and a boy. In both terms, girls assigned more of the items to the girl. Similarly, boys assigned more of the items to the boy, and this effect was stronger for boys in the summer term. Few items were consistently gender marked by both girls and boys, though a photograph of a doll was an exception. Boys appeared to avoid assigning these consensually feminine objects to the boy. Girls, on the other hand, claimed the large bricks and the Lego, lending support to teachers' concerns about girls' access to them in the face of the boys' forceful and seemingly legitimate claims.

Clearer evidence of gender marking appeared when we asked children to indicate which picture was the odd one out in a set of three drawings, each of a child with a toy that matched or failed to match her own gender. Both girls and boys were more likely to choose a picture of a boy playing with a 'girl's' toy, and when one boy appeared with two girls he was more likely to be selected as odd than one girl with two boys. Girls and boys share a common set of social representations in which masculinity is salient and associated with exclusivity.

Children also agreed on how to assign objects, activities and behaviourial traits to girl and boy characters. To a limited extent, they did this in accordance with social representations of gender, although in each gender group the most consistent assignments related to their own gender. Boys assigned a photograph of dolls and teddies to girls, but girls themselves were not consistent when assigning objects to children according to gender. Girls chose a girl as the character in a story who was pushed and hurt, while boys chose a boy character to mend the phone. Girls but not boys chose a girl character to be afraid, while boys claimed a boy to shout and be brave. On this task, girls and boys claimed distinct gender identities.

There is little doubt that children enter school with structured gender identities and an allegiance to their own gender group. Evidence of the influence of the teacher indicates that there is some flexibility in children's commitment to social representations of gender and that school can provide an arena within which rigid conformity may be tempered. Our discussions with teachers revealed a genuine desire to provide greater scope for girls and boys to gain access to experience unfettered by conventional gender restrictions. Despite this, the rigidity with which older children adhere to gender prescriptions has led theorists such as John Archer to suggest that girls and boys inhabit different social worlds and follow distinct developmental pathways. I believe that this deep separation of femininity and masculinity reflects the naturalisation of gender and a conceptual collapse of the distinction between sex and gender.

Again, an episode from one school illustrates the argument. In the discussion mentioned earlier about girls' and boys' use of construction toys, the head

teacher suggested that it was natural for boys to be more active, stronger and hence to require more space. Citing my research with Caroline Smith which showed that the same six-month-old infant was encouraged by mothers to be active when presented as a boy, but soothed and contained when presented as a girl, I suggested that adults' expectations might influence the way infants and young children experience activity and space.

The evidence was greeted with surprise and pleasure. Without intending to do so, these teachers had naturalised the social gender identities which their reception class children brought to school. Their own unexamined expectations based on hypotheses about biologically determined characteristics would be a brake on any change they might wish to affect. As John Stuart Mill said more than a hundred years ago: 'I deny that anyone knows, or can know, the nature of the two sexes, as long as they have only been seen in the present relationto one another.'

Dr Barbara Lloyd is reader in psychology at the University of Sussex. She is the author of Sex and Gender, with John Archer, Cambridge University Press, 1985, and the forthcoming Gender Identities and Education (Harvester-Wheatsheaf) with Gerard Duveen. Her research is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council in Britain and the Spencer Foundation of Chicago, Illinois.

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Kids Hold The Key To Gender Equality!
Tue Apr 01 11:53:45 BST 2008 by **Nirupama**

An excellent article! My explorations for a lasting intervention on the gender issue had always brought me down to working with toddlers and young children. The research is a vindication of my long-held belief that genders are internalised at a very young age, because of which most people naturalise it and attribute it to biology! While often, we have to

simply rely on the strength of our convictions to convey our stance, a research like this is a great support to the cause. Great work! Really appreciate the clarity of thought and compelling communication of findings. However, it is really unfortunate that 20 years down the line, even today, we have people raising the same fundamental questions. I only wish such research findings could transcend the limited circles in which they are circulated and reach the public at large. Please keep me posted on any further such findings / writings which can help strengthen the cause against gender-based discrimination. Also, do let me know if there is some way in which i could contribute my efforts to such research. I am a young development practitioner based in India.

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Gender Expectations

Fri Oct 31 22:58:12 GMT 2008 by **John Lowther**

While I am anything but an expert, it seems to me that parental expectations are very powerful when it comes to effecting the behavior of very young children.

Sometimes I wonder how (and if) children were affected when they were dressed as the opposite sex when they were quite young. (If I remember correctly, the late President Dwight D. Eisenhower was dressed as a girl 'till he was something like three years old, because his mother wanted a girl. His museum has photos of the young Ike wearing dresses.) I understand this was not uncommon in the late Victorian era...

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